



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

## ON THE DECORATION OF PIANOS.

BY THEODORE CHILD.



ACCORDING to all competent authorities immense progress has been made since the last century in the construction of musical instruments. There are, however, people who think that with all these modern improvements something has been lost. The more perfect the different modern instruments become the more similar do they become in character of tone or *timbre*, as the French call it. The individuality of instruments is growing less and less pronounced. Now one scarcely needs to be a musical composer to know how much more suitable one *timbre* or character of tone is for the expression of a certain emotion than another. And those who had the pleasure of assisting at the concerts on antique instruments given at the Albert Hall, London, in the summer of 1885, were able to discover for themselves that the old instruments, imperfect though they were in many respects, yet possessed in a high degree variety and individuality of *timbre* or *klangfarbe*.

Many of the lutes and cithers in the South Kensington collection proved to be so rich and mellow in tone that the musicians regretted that these instruments have now entirely fallen into oblivion. It is a curious fact that during more than two centuries no improvements have been made in instruments of the violin class, and it is equally curious to notice that the violin and its derivatives remain almost the only instruments in the modern orchestra at all pleasing to the eye.

Tradition in this case has been strong enough to preserve to the violin the rounded and swelling forms which Stradivarius and Guarnerius gave to it. But look at the other instruments in the modern orchestra, the flutes, the clarionettes, the horns, the trombones, bugles, cornets à piston. Can anything be meaner, ruder and harder than their forms? Look at the harmonicas and above all at the piano forte and ask yourself how they who love sweet music can consent to distill it out of such hideous retorts. Was there ever any object of household furni-

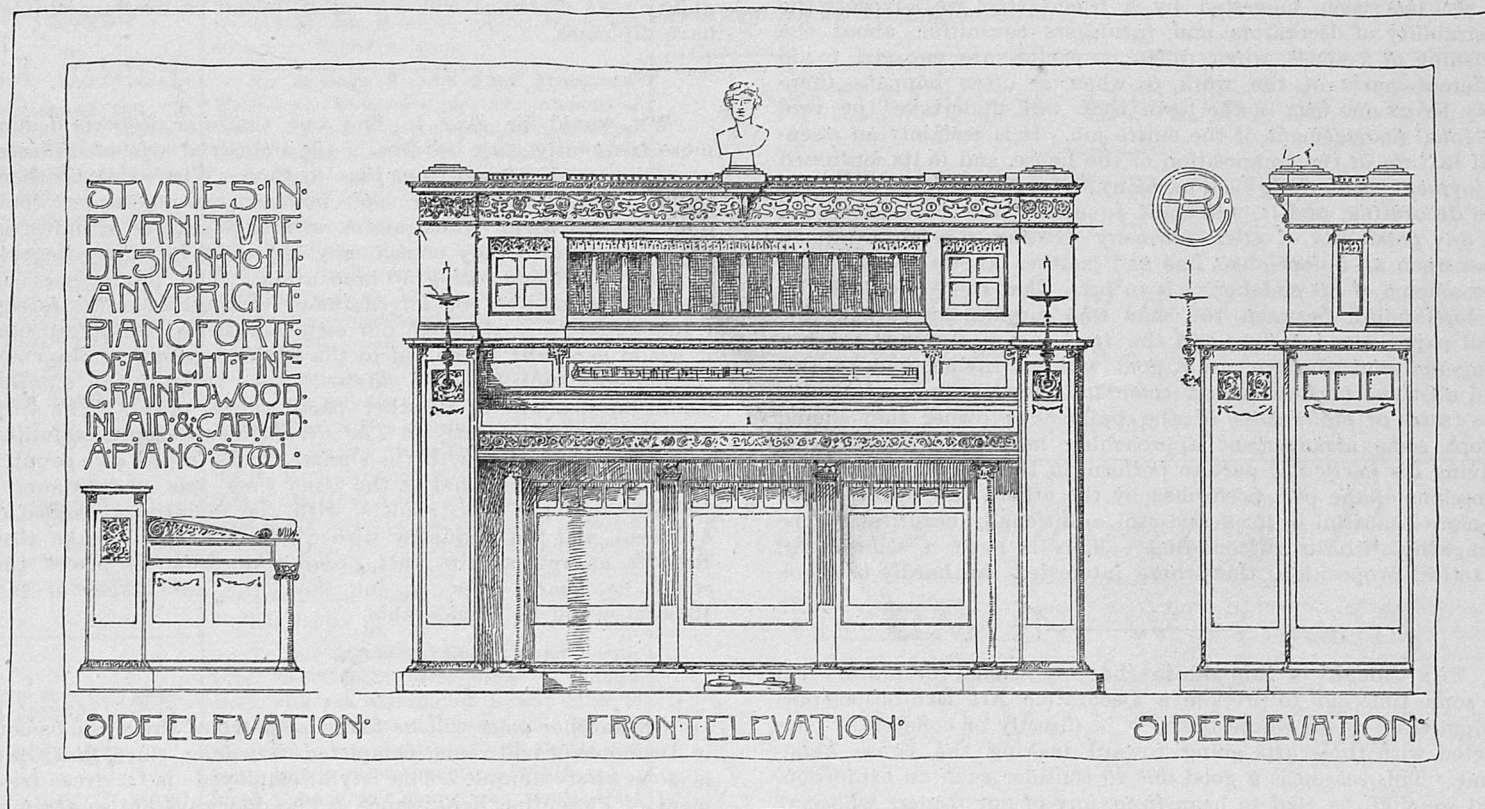
reader will doubtless find many replies to these interrogations, such as for instance the fact that the modern piano is almost entirely a machine made article. Certainly in spite of machines the human hand remains "the most perfect agent of material power existing in the universe," but this is precisely one of the great problems of modern times to combine the two forces of art and industry, and to produce artistic work in such quantities and conditions as modern democratic society requires. Let machines be used for hard drudgery and necessary toil, but do not let us throw the blame on machines for the shortcomings of the directing minds. The machine does not conceive the work it executes.

In point of fact writers on decorative art have hitherto paid no attention to the decoration of pianos. The most popular of modern musical instruments has shared the fate of the billiard table; it has been left entirely in the hands of men who have been absorbed in the perfections of the technical and scientific parts and who have contented themselves with simply boxing up and supporting their work. The problem in piano cases is the same, namely to establish a great weight on a solid basis, in the one case the slate bed of the billiard table, in the other the mechanism of the piano.

(This is written from a French standpoint, the American billiard table has become a work of art unknown to English or Continental lovers of the game.—ED.)

The modern piano is a development of the instrument known as the clavichord or clarichord in the fifteenth century, and on the spinet or virginal in the sixteenth century. The harpsichord and dulcimer is a variation of the same instrument. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Backers of Antwerp perfected the instrument as did the Frenchman Pascal Taskin (1730-1793) and so it became the clavecin, the strings of which were scratched with a quill or plectrum. But in the first half of the eighteenth century Christofali at Padua, Marius at Paris and Gottlieb Schroeter in Saxony conceived the idea of striking the strings of the clavecin with a hammer, and from this invention came the piano forte, the first of which was made by Silbermann of Freyberg about 1730. Then came Sebastian and Pierre Erard, the famous harp-makers, who invented the escapement movement for the hammer. Then came all the improvements of the Broadwoods, and Pleyels and Steinways and Chickering's and finally the iron frame for the chords. And all the time the piano grew more and more ugly.

Compare an old spinet of Backers with a modern grand piano. The former is graceful in line and beautiful in decora-



DESIGN FOR UPRIGHT PIANO AND STOOL, BY RALPH A. GRAM.

ture more unpleasing to the eye than the piano, whether upright or horizontal? And yet nowadays—one might perhaps say alas!—the piano has become an indispensable article in every comfortable house, it is one of the great triumphs of modern industry, and no instrument is technically more perfect.

Why has the piano, while becoming mechanically so perfect, grown externally so ugly? Why has the piano remained outside the orbit of our modern reformers of taste? Why have the Charles Blancs and the Havards in their doctrinal treatises on art in the house neglected to say anything about the piano? The

tion. The legs are elegant in shape and beautifully ornamented; the case is painted or lacquered in designs in the back and the front; the lid is lacquered or painted inside and out. Artists like Gillot and Watteau did not disdain to compose and paint subjects for *clavecine* and some of the finest vernis Martin work was made for these graceful instruments which now figure in museums and private collections. Evidently the modern piano, owing to the weight of the iron frame and mechanism, cannot be constructed with the slender elegance of these old instruments. Very solid legs are absolutely necessary, but there is no excuse



## THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

for rendering these legs heavy and clumsy by overloading them with coarse and meaningless carving.

The key-board, the case and the lid of a piano do not admit carving. Why then carve the legs? It is about as rational as it would be to place an ironing-board on a series of Corinthian columns. In the grand piano the very nature of the instrument dictates the form, namely that of a harp placed horizontally. The form must therefore be triangular with a prolongation of the base of the triangle, and for variety and grace one side of the triangle may be hollowed out. The form is necessarily irregular, but it is only by pure wilfulness that it can be made inelegant. And yet in reality one rarely sees a grand piano well proportioned. As regards the legs and case we ought to insist on the maintenance of the traditional form with long lines and a sweeping curve, and to protest against meaningless rounding off of ends and corners, and above all against legs encumbered with carving.

I am afraid the "cottage" piano is beyond all hope; it is an object as rarely endurable for the eye as it is for the ear. On the other hand a well proportioned grand piano may be a beautiful object. Its lines alone may render it pleasing to the eye, and if the beauty of the wood is not sufficient to redeem the vastness of its flat surfaces, the lid when closed affords display room for a fine piece of embroidered silk or velvet. The grand piano, however, lends itself especially to flat decoration, whether by means of marquetry or of painting. Red and yellow brass, and black and white steel marquetry on natural light colored wood will produce a fine effect.

Mr. Alma Tademan has a Broadwood grand decorated in this way, the case being of natural unpolished wood inlaid with cedar and ivory and fine brass as the historian of Solomon would say. The inside of the lid of the piano is paneled with parchment enriched by the autographs of famous musicians who have inscribed their names on the lifted flap after having performed on the keys. This idea for the decoration of the flap is amusing, but after all one would not care to live with a piano that was perpetually parading before one's eyes a collection of autographs.

The only modern grand piano that I have seen which is really decorated in a complete and satisfactory manner is one in the possession of Mr. W. Graham, of London. The decorator is no other than that great and famous artist, Mr. Edward Burne Jones. The case of the piano is of oak and cedar of extreme simplicity of silhouette, and utterly free from heavy moldings or any offensive excrescences playing the comedy of ornament. The sides of the case are divided into simple panels, in each of which are round medallions in groups of three or four. The legs are turned, and like the whole of the rest of the piano they are painted gray willow green, but painted lightly and without varnish, so that the grain of the wood is perceptible. Each of the medallions on the sides of the case is painted in grisaille with an episode from the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice. The outside of the flap is covered with branches of sage green foliage on gray green ground; in one corner is a large medallion of an angel with pink wings, and on the shoulder of the flap is a Gothic scroll. The inside of the flap is covered completely with an allegorical composition. In the centre a nude female figure, "Terra omniparens," Earth, the universal mother, sits enthroned amidst strange arabesques of vine leaves and trailing vines, the leaves of pale green, the vines of greenish blue, the whole on a background of pale blue clouds edged with gold. In the lap of mother earth are cherubs sleeping, while some twenty other chubby cherubs and imps are clambering amongst the vine leaves and branches. The flesh color on this background of blue and gold forms a singularly rich harmony, and the central figure of "Terra omniparens" has all the calm intensity of Burne-Jones' conceptions.

The composition, too, with its more or less symmetrical arabesques, is essentially decorative. But this is not all. The sound board under the stretched chords of the piano is gilded and diapered with a small design, and over this gold field are strewn peach blossoms and scattered leaves and petals, and sprays of leaf and flower together that smile sweetly through the veil of close-laid, harmonious wires. The key board too is decorated with scattered peach blossom and leaves and dull gold. It is a lovely, calm and reposeful object, this piano on which Burne-Jones has shown how modern intellectual painting can adapt itself to decoration; it is the softest harmony of color possible.

DESIGN FOR FRONT PANEL OF PIANO, BY E. W. BURNES-JONES.

